



Making Life Easier
888-874-7290



The Balancing Act

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Having both a career and a family is overwhelming for many parents. It's difficult to juggle the demands of a boss, co-workers, children and a spouse, while also attempting to maintain time for yourself. However, with the aid of some helpful techniques to manage both your guilt and your time, you can be sensitive to everyone's needs, including your own.

The guilt factor

Many working parents feel guilty about having to leave their families while at work. Whether you are working for financial reasons or personal satisfaction, it may be difficult to justify the fact that you are not with your children all day. There are, however, many benefits for both parents and children when parents work.

Studies have found that the happiest people are those parents who work. By having multiple roles in their lives, working parents are able to build self-esteem from different places. Also, having a job can help parents gain better perspective on their lives, by not concentrating solely on small problems related to children or a job. Fathers of dual-income families tend to spend more time with their children than fathers who are the single earner. Also, the home lives of working parents tend to be more efficient.

Children who have working parents are inclined to have a greater sense of independence, because their parents rely on them to help with household responsibilities. Also, children whose parents work are less likely to have sexist attitudes, because they see that it is not always dad who is the breadwinner in the family. Lastly, because children with working parents are in a child care arrangement, they have greater exposure to other children and adults, which aids in social development.

When you just can't be there

It's one of every working parent's worst nightmares. The school play in which your child has a starring role is at the exact same time as an important work meeting that can be neither rescheduled nor missed. How do you prepare your child for the problem of missing a special event?

You should talk honestly with your child as soon as you know that there will be a conflict. If you

know that there is no way that you can attend, be truthful and keep your child informed. To avoid uncertainty, do not tell him “maybe” if you truly mean “no.” You then want to listen to and sympathize with your child’s feelings. Don’t tell him how he should be feeling, but instead encourage him to talk honestly with you. While your child may not understand why you can’t be present, explain that you are not choosing work over him, but rather you need to attend this meeting and can’t reschedule. Let him know how you feel, perhaps frustrated, sad and angry.

You can then brainstorm with your child to find other ways to share in the special event. Perhaps you could attend a play rehearsal, videotape the performance with the promise of later watching it together, or help your child to practice at home. Ask someone else with whom the child is close to attend; extended family or friends may be honored to be invited and thrilled to go. Acknowledge your child on the special day by sending flowers or calling before the event.

After the day is over, talk to your child about the event. You might apologize, but don’t overdo it, because you want your child to get over the disappointment. Ask for details of the day, watch the videotape, call the person who attended and let your child talk to him or her as well. Try not to promise that you will be there the next time because, unfortunately, you may not be able to.

Away overnight on business

Being away from your family during the day is hard enough, but sometimes you need to be gone overnight. There are ways that you can prepare your family for this event, stay close while you are gone, and effectively reunite when you return.

Let your child(ren) know where you are going and when you will be back. Don’t forget to thank your spouse in advance, and let him or her know that you will put in some extra time at home when you return. Before you leave, determine with your family the best time to call, and try your best to stick to the schedule. Hide notes where you think your family will find them when you are gone. While you are away, you can send postcards or faxes, and leave messages on your home answering machine for your family to hear once they return home at night. Empathize with your spouse about any difficult situations that you may be missing. Upon your return, reunite with each family member separately, and then together as a whole.

Prioritize, prioritize, prioritize!

One of the most important things you can do when your responsibilities seem overwhelming is to decide which tasks must get done, as opposed to those that should get done. By deciding what matters most to you and what can’t be compromised, you will be in a better position to accomplish your tasks in the amount of time that you have available.

For example, many working parents decide that it is not the end of the world if all of the beds in the house are not made each morning. Or perhaps you will realize that it is okay to have a healthy cereal for breakfast, rather than a hot breakfast which takes more time to prepare and eat.

If, after prioritizing, you realize that you still can't accomplish all of the important tasks, consider asking for help. You can ask a spouse or child to perform certain chores, or even hire someone if necessary. While others may not do something the exact way that you prefer, try to be satisfied with a less than "perfect" job. Realize the alternative may be not getting the task done at all.

One fun way to involve your family in chores is to take pictures of the activities (for example, your vacuum cleaner) and then take pictures of your family members. Paste the chore pictures to poster board, and by using Velcro on the family pictures, you can assign chores to everyone. You can involve your children in preparing the chart, and are also able to switch the pictures as often as you wish.

Planning ahead

One great way to manage your time is to learn to plan ahead. Your goal is to simplify all of the things that need to get done. For example, start by making a list of everything that you need to do. It's good to include some fun things on the list, as well. As you now know, it is important to first determine which things on the list are the most crucial. Then, look at the list to determine if any of the tasks can be combined. For example, can you pick up certain items at the same store or in the same shopping area? Can you do the laundry and pay the bills at the same time? By planning these events in advance, it is easier to use your time more effectively. Don't forget to cross items off your list so you will feel accomplished.

To keep family events in order, make a large calendar onto which everyone can put their weekly events. If you notice that your son needs to be picked up at soccer practice the same night that you have to work late, you can arrange in advance to have someone else pick him up. Another idea is to keep baskets by the door for your family to store important items. Each member of your family can have his own basket into which he can put hats and gloves, homework assignments or keys. This way, when they leave in the morning, they know where everything is. It also helps to cut down on clutter in the house.

You can also do things at night to plan for the next morning. Help your children to lay out clothing and prepare their school things for the next morning. You can even set up breakfast the night before to make it easier the following morning. Remember, your goal is to simplify things in order to make your life less complicated!

Family time

Since you are separated from your family most of the day, you'll want to spend quality time with them when you can. Your children and your spouse both need your time, and (believe it or not) there are ways that you can structure this time to give them all what they need.

Establish comfortable family routines with daily schedules. This serves to assure your children that their world is secure and predictable, and also helps your family to use time more productively. For example, you and your child can make a morning schedule using pictures of her waking up, getting washed, dressing and eating breakfast. Then arrange these pictures in the correct order on poster board so she can have help in determining the order of her schedule. Your child does not need to be able to read in order to understand this, and can even have fun in making the chart.

Finding quality time with your children can be difficult when everyone in your family is busy. Try to spend some time (even if it's brief) with each of your children alone during the day. You can read books, help with homework or have a conversation about the day's events. Volunteer at your child's school or child care. You can chaperone field trips, attend special events or contribute to your child's "career" day.

Spend time with your family together as a unit. Depending on the ages of your children, it may be difficult to gather everyone together at the same time. You might conduct a family meeting during which you set aside a future date for a family activity; use the meeting to select the activity type as well. Some families keep certain times "sacred," moments during the week that are automatically devoted to family events. For example, you may want to decide that each night's dinner or Sunday afternoons is when the family gathers together.

Along with spending time with your children and family together, it is also important to be with your spouse alone. Structure your evening so that your children go to bed at the same time each night, then spend the remainder of the evening with your spouse. You need time during each day to discuss family issues, as well as time as a couple out of the home, doing things that you enjoy. Arrange for a babysitter, friend or family member to watch your children while you go out. Some families share babysitting duty with neighbors and friends, so that every other week, one couple gets to go out while the other couple stays home with the children.

Personal time

Of course, it is also necessary to set aside some time just for yourself. If you are not happy, your family won't be happy either. The trick is first to find time for yourself. Remember that it is okay to say "no." If you have too many responsibilities already, do not take on more. By making yourself a priority, you will be sure to set aside the necessary time for yourself. Don't forget that you can also ask for help from others so that you can better meet your own needs.

When you leave work at night, try to leave your work there. Use your commute to unwind and prepare yourself for the evening. When you arrive home, let your children know that you need some time to change your clothes and clean yourself up. Make this ritual a routine so that your children will know what to expect. If your children are hungry when you arrive home, set out a snack for them or encourage them to do it themselves. This will also buy you some time before dinner needs to be ready and on the table.

Once you have found time for yourself, try to set aside thoughts about your family and their needs, and focus on yourself. Take up a hobby that you have ignored or wanted to start. Join a club or group with people who have similar interests. Talk to or write a letter to a friend. Read a book. Take a bath. Exercise by yourself or with a friend. This is your time to accomplish the fun things that you put on your list of priorities. You need time on your own each day to revitalize so that you can be an effective employee, parent and spouse.

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